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## THE INFLUENCE OF FERGUSSON ON BURNS

After reading several accounts of the life and writings of Robert Fergusson, both early and recent, I set to work upon a masterly introduction in which I intended to inform the reader that, some exaggeration of expression discounted, Robert Burns would not have been the great poet that he actually became, if Robert Fergusson had not lived, wrought and died before him. I then turned to the various biographers and critics of the later poet—Lockhart, Carlyle, Wilson, Chambers, (as revised by Wallace), Shairp, Blackie, Setoun in the Famous Scots Series, and Henley in the Centenary Burns,—these do not exhaust the list—and I found that compared to the total amount of space, scarcely one per cent. was devoted to Fergusson's relations to Burns. In other words, these experienced critics had not considered their relations important enough to justify longer treatment.

This discovery took some of the life out of my intended introduction, and I determined before using it, to find out which party was correct—the critics of Fergusson or those of Burns. I read Burns's prose works ; I read his poetry. And the conclusion which I reached led me to destroy my original introduction. This is to say in plain prose that Fergusson's influence was not "a prime influence," although the late Mr. Henley seems to have thought it was. Oddly enough, he contradicts his own statement by relegating his declaration to a footnote in his essay in which not more than half a page of text is given to Fergusson.<sup>1</sup>

So much by way of preliminary. The present essay is an attempt, not to discover whether Burns was influenced to a greater or lesser degree by the Edinburgh poet, but to ascertain just what that influence was, and in what it manifested itself.

### I

The correspondence of Burns, his first *Commonplace book*, the *Kilmarnock preface*, and five of his poems, contain references to Fergusson, sufficient for us to establish Burns's opinion

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<sup>1</sup> *Centenary Burns*, vol. iv ; p. 261-2, note.

of his predecessor. In the autobiographical letter to Doctor Moore, (letter lviii in the Globe Edition of Burns), occurs that well-known passage in which the poet declares that "rhyme, except some religious pieces that are in print, I had given up; but meeting with Fergusson's Scottish Poems I strung anew my wildly sounding lyre with emulating vigour." The first Commonplace book tells of Burns being pleased with "the excellent Ramsay and the still more excellent Fergusson." The revised Chambers (vol. ii, p. 58) quotes the letter to the Canongate Bailies, in which Burns asked and obtained from these magistrates, permission to erect a tombstone at his own expense, over the grave of Fergusson. The letter describes the latter as "the so justly celebrated poet, a man whose talents for ages to come will do honor to our Caledonian name." Another letter (letter lxxvii) speaks of Ramsay and "poor Bob Fergusson." In yet another (letter cccxxi), written a few months before his death, Burns in his misery quotes a couplet from Fergusson's paraphrase of the third chapter of Job, doubtless from memory as it is somewhat inaccurate. And finally letter clxxxvii, addressed to Peter Stuart, editor at the time of a London periodical, *The Star*, contains a high sounding though sincere apostrophe to the earlier poet: "Poor Fergusson! If there be a life beyond the grave which I trust there is; and if there be a good God presiding over nature, which I am sure there is; thou art now enjoying existence in a glorious world, where worth of the heart alone is distinction in the man; where riches, deprived of all their pleasure-purchasing powers, return to their native sordid matter; where titles and honors are the disregarded reveries of an idle dream; and where that heavy virtue, which is the negative consequence of steady dullness, and those thoughtless, though often destructive, follies which are the unavoidable aberrations of frail human nature, will be thrown into equal oblivion, as if they had never been!"

The conclusions which are to be drawn from these references extending in time over a period of fourteen years, only ending with the poet's death, are two: first, we observe that the later poet always preserved a kindly feeling toward his ill-fated predecessor who indeed he felt in many ways to resemble himself;

and second, Burns's meeting with Fergusson's poems in 1782 acted as an inspiration, and led him to take up once more his almost discontinued rhyming.

If we turn to the five poems in which mention is made of Fergusson's character or genius, we find the same thing to hold true. In the "Epistle to John Lapraik," among several other poets, Fergusson is characterized as the "bauld an' slee." In another, "To William Simpson of Ochiltree," the poet is thrice referred to. In stanza three he is mentioned immediately after Ramsay and Hamilton of Gilbertfield, as

. . . the writer-chiel,  
A deathless name.

The next stanza is entirely Fergusson's and is chiefly occupied with cursing the "E'nbrugh gentry" for leaving the poet, as he erroneously supposed, to starve,

The tythe o' what ye waste at cartes  
Wad stow'd his pantry!

and in stanza eight we again hear of "Ramsay an' famous Fergusson."

In addition to these there are three poems which have the Edinburgh poet for their theme. One, entitled by the Centenary editors "Apostrophe to Fergusson" and which was written under a portrait of the latter in a copy of his poems, laments the poet in unrhymed verse :

O thou, my elder brother in misfortune,  
By far my elder brother in the Muse,  
With tears I pity thy unhappy fate! etc.

The second, "Lines on Fergusson," is another apostrophe :

Ill-fated genius! Heaven-taught Fergusson!  
What heart that feels, and will not yield a tear  
To think Life's sun did set, e'er well begun  
To shed its influence on thy bright career! etc.

The third is the well known epitaph on Fergusson's grave-stone :

No sculptur'd Marble here, nor pompous lay,  
No storied Urn nor animated Bust;  
This simple stone directs pale Scotia's way  
To pour her sorrows o'er her Poet's dust.

The poet later added two other stanzas in the same strain.

These poems only reinforce the conclusions I have already stated in connection with the letters and the *Commonplace book*, namely, that "the volume of Fergusson first fired him with the definite ambition of being himself a poet"<sup>2</sup> and that he, on every occasion manifested for his unfortunate predecessor a real admiration and sympathy.

## II

We have now to consider another statement of Burns, a statement which in the weighing and examining, will occupy our attention for the rest of this essay. In the *Kilmarnock* preface, Burns tells us that both Ramsay<sup>3</sup> and Fergusson have been "often in his eye; but rather with a view to kindle at their flame, than for servile imitation." In other words, to what degree does Burns "kindle at their flame," or rather Fergusson's flame, and in how far is Burns a servile imitator?

Except in one instance, we cannot assert positively that Burns borrowed his measures from Fergusson more than from the other Scottish poets. This one exception is the stanza of "Holy Fair," "The Dream," "Halloween," and "The Ordination," and consists of a double quatrain plus a rider (*a b a b c d c d e*). The poet's favorite six-line stave (*a a a b a b*), exemplified in the "Mountain Daisy," has been traced back to Chaucer's time and before;<sup>4</sup> upon its revival by Sir Robert Semphill of Beltrees, it was employed by Ramsay, Hamilton of Gilbertfield, and others besides Fergusson. Burns may have taken it from any of these poets. Further his use of the octasyllabic and heroic couplets was sanctioned as well by the example of Ramsay<sup>5</sup> as by that of

<sup>2</sup> John Nichol, "Robert Burns" 1896; p. 34.

<sup>3</sup> Ramsay lies outside our present discussion, but I have mentioned him and others whenever Burns himself has mentioned them in company with Fergusson, in order to indicate that the latter was not the only author in his thoughts. Indeed, if the "favorite author" argument can be said to count for anything, Fergusson at once loses ground. In letter cccxv (*Globe Edition of Burns*), we learn that his "favorite author" (prose writer) is Mackenzie; and among poets Goldsmith occupies the warmest place. (Letter ccix.)

<sup>4</sup> Centenary Burns, ii; 341-2, "Lines on Meeting with Lord Daer."

<sup>5</sup> It is important to note that Burns was acquainted with Ramsay's works many years before he happened upon Fergusson's poems, (letter lviii to Dr. Moore). This fact has been neglected by the critics. A glance at the

Fergusson. And finally, it should be remembered that the fascinating measure of many of Burns's best pieces (see the opening stanza of the "Jolly Beggars" for illustration) is not in Fergusson at all.

In the matter of poetic form, it is again impossible to dogmatically stamp this or that poem as Fergussonian and nothing else. Fergusson did write epistles, elegies and pastorals. But he borrowed these forms from men with whom Burns also was acquainted—from Ramsay and Hamilton of Gilbertfield. And it only adds to the force of our argument to learn from Burns himself (in his autobiographic letter) that one of his early books was Ramsay. It is probable, however, that Fergusson's dialogue poems, like "Planestanes and Causey" and the "Kirkyard Eclogue," did suggest the form of several of Burns's pieces—notably "The Twa Dogs" and "The Brigs of Ayr."

As far as the formal side of poetry is concerned then, we are fairly justified in refusing to admit Fergusson as a really important influence. Only two things can be definitely said to have been taken from his poetry—the dialogue form (something a poet of any merit could have discovered for himself) and the stanza of "Holy Fair."

### III

We must seek for Burns's borrowings in the subjects and ideas of his poems. Here, the partisans of Fergusson have more facts to support their claims. And yet, even here the actual borrowings do not amount to much more than two or three instances.

Every critic and editor of Burns has seen some resemblances between "The Cotter's Saturday Night" and "The Farmer's Ingle." The extent of these resemblances is accurately set forth in an oft-quoted passage of the poet's brother Gilbert.<sup>6</sup> It consists of "the hint of the plan and title of the poem." The

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notes to the Centenary Edition indicates that Ramsay *was* an influence, possibly a greater than Fergusson. Another fact of importance, too seldom insisted upon, is the influence of the folk poetry and songs. I think Mr. Andrew Lang is right in saying that the tales and songs that Burns heard during his early years (see Burns's letter to Dr. Moore) made a deep impression upon a large portion of his poetry.

<sup>6</sup> Burns's Works, ed. Peterkin, 1815. iii, 444.

similarity of the poems in title and theme is plain to all and needs no comment. In addition to these there are similarities (of the most general sort, however), in four places : stanza one of Fergusson and stanza two of Burns, both introductory, portray the same aspect of Nature. Stanza nine in Fergusson and the latter half of stanza five in Burns are somewhat related in that both deal with the same subject—the partial parents eying their childrens’ “hopeful years.” The third general resemblance occurs in the stanza describing the incidents of the supper. Lastly there is a resemblance between the closing stanza in the “Farmer’s Ingle” (to which should be added stanza five) and the final three stanzas in the “Saturday Night”—both pieces concluding in a patriotic strain. My estimate is a generous one, for a severe critic may well deny that the similarities cited are similarities at all, and can argue that they owe their resemblances principally to the sameness in the theme.

Those scenes in Burns’s poem which are totally absent from Fergusson’s, occur in stanza three where the “wee things” are watching for their father ; in stanza four which describes the return of the elder boys and their sister Jenny ; in the first half of the next stanza which tells of their happy greetings ; the whole of stanza six containing the parents’ admonitions ; the love episode (seven to ten inclusive) ; and the religious scenes (stanzas twelve through eighteen). Arithmetically computed, fully two-thirds of the poem is pure Burns. Add to this two other facts : first, that Fergusson’s piece is in unalloyed Scotch, while twelve out of twenty-one stanzas in “The Cotter” are in English ; and second, that Burns employs the true Spenserian stanza while Fergusson uses a false,<sup>7</sup>—when we add these facts to the other, we must again declare that Burns owes relatively little to his predecessor. At most, we can only say that “The Cotter’s Saturday Night” *recalls* “The Farmer’s Ingle.”

Though the titles scarcely differ and the stanza is the same, there is very little similarity between Fergusson’s “Hallow-Fair”

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<sup>7</sup> Fergusson’s stanza is false in two respects. His rhyme scheme is *a b a b c d c d d*: and the ninth line is not of the same length throughout ; in three stanzas we have the Alexandrine, (iv, vii, xiii), in one the decasyllabic catalectic, (x), and the rest are decasyllabic.

and Burns's "Holy Fair." The latter has much closer relations, as most editors have pointed out, with Fergusson's "Leith Races." Besides a similarity in the stanza, there is a similarity in the introductory lines of both poems. Fergusson presents the narrator to a personified being called Mirth. Burns has three "hizzies" one of which is Fun. After their introduction and the bargain is made to accompany the merry personages to the festival the poets speak no more of them. The opening quatrains in each of the poems bear so striking a resemblance that I give them here.<sup>8</sup> Fergusson's reads :

In July month, ae bonny morn,  
Whan Nature's rokely green  
Was spread o'er ilka rigg o' corn  
To charm our roving een;

Burns's :

Upon a simmer Sunday morn,  
When Nature's face is fair,  
I walk'd forth to view the corn,  
An' snuff the caller air.

Burns's obligations to "Leith Races" extend no farther than the introductory stanzas. After the fifth of "Leith Races" and the sixth of "Holy Fair," the poets go their own ways. Except in one or two isolated passages to be mentioned further on, this poem represents the closest Burns ever came to actual appropriation of the earlier poet's work, and even in this instance the plagiarism is not a slavish reproduction.

A small group of elegies, three in number, have been identified with two of Fergusson's — one on the "Death of Mr. David Gregory" and the other "On the Death of Scots Music." Both of these were modelled upon Semphill's "Elegy on Habbie Simson",<sup>9</sup> with which Burns also was familiar. The "Death of Scots Music" may have been in Burns's mind when he wrote

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<sup>8</sup> Compare also, the second half of Fergusson's stanza i with Burns's stanzas ii and iii; stanza iii of Fergusson with the first half of stanza iv in Burns; stanzas ii and iv in Fergusson with the second half of stanza iv and stanza v in Burns; and stanza v of Fergusson with stanza vi in Burns.

<sup>9</sup> Henderson, "A Little Book of Scottish Verse," p. 148.



his "Elegy on Capt. Matthew Henderson." In both the stave is the same, both are governed by a similar mood, and both call upon all things to mourn. This is all that can be said.

But for a slight similarity between Burns's opening stanza and the opening stanza of Fergusson, it would have been possible to have selected at random either "Habbie Simson" or "Gregory," as the model of Burns's "Poor Mailie's Elegy." It resembles both in stave and rider (" . . . dead").

In "Tam Samson's Elegy" also, the stave and rider (" . . . dead") are similar to those in the pieces by Semphill and Fergusson. But the weight of other evidence is decidedly in favor of Semphill. First, the surnames "Simson" and "Samson" are much alike. And second, in three separate instances the lines in Burns are taken bodily from the seventeenth century poet; while in a fourth, there is a substitution of only one unimportant word ("yet" for "but")<sup>10</sup>. Fergusson is never thus reproduced not even where there can be no doubt that he is the model.

Many critics have remarked a similarity between Fergusson's "Leith Races" and "Hallow Fair," and Burns's "Halloween." Except in stanza and perhaps in title, I see none. The same thing applies to "Caller Water" and "Scotch Drink"; and the Centenary Editors notwithstanding, still less do I read in the latter poem a parody on the former.

"The Brigs of Ayr" recalls "Ghaists." The metre is the same, the speakers are spirits, both have the dialogue form, and both begin with a nature description. Here and there, there is a faint suggestion of "Planestanes and Causey," but nothing definite.

We know from Burns's own words<sup>11</sup> that when he wrote his "Lea-Rig," he was aware of a song having the same stanza and title by Fergusson. Both were taken from one source — Herd's Collection of "Ancient and Modern Songs." Burns, however, took nothing from Fergusson.

There remain for mention a few parallel passages. Several

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<sup>10</sup> Compare the fourth lines in stanzas iii, v, vii and xv of Burns with the fourth lines in stanzas i, iii, v, and xii of Semphill.

<sup>11</sup> Centenary Burns, vol. iii; page 297.

have been discovered by Dr. Grosart in his biography of Fergusson in the Famous Scots Series. Many of them, however, are not parallels at all, and exhibit nothing more than the author's determination to support at any cost the difficult proposition that Fergusson's "metrical forms became Burns's metrical forms; his rhymes and rhythms became Burns's rhymes and rhythms . . . His vocabulary and phrases and felicitous lines largely became Burns's, and superseded his own Ayrshire dialectal words. His finest observations of nature and human nature, his most ebullient humor, his rarest insight into character, his sudden darts of emotion, now of wrath and now of ruth, perpetually reflect Fergusson."<sup>12</sup>

Those parallels which from similarities of phraseology, seem to me probable appropriations are as follows :

These lines from "Caller Water":

When father Adie first pat spade in  
The bonny yeard of ancient Eden ;

were used by Burns in his "Address to the Deil,"—

Lang syne in Eden's bonie yard ;

Fergusson's "Election " has this :

For two months twa their saul is lent  
For the town's gude indendit.

And Burns's "Twa Dogs " this :

For Britain's guid his saul indentin.

Fergusson's "Elegy on John Hogg " opens thus :

Death, what's ado? the de'il belicket,  
Or wi' your stang you ne'er had pricket,  
Or our auld Alma Mater tricket  
O' poor John Hogg.  
And trail'd him ben thro' your mark wicket  
As dead's a log.

Burns closely parallels this in thought as well as phrasing in his lines to Collector Mitchell :

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<sup>12</sup> Robert Fergusson by A. B. Grosart, p. 140.

Ye've heard this while how I've been licket,  
 And by fell Death was nearly nicket :  
 Grim loon ! he got me by the fecket,  
     And sair me sheuk ;  
 But by guid luck I lap a wicket,  
     And turn'd a neuk.

Finally, this line from "The Ghaists":

    Cauld blaws the nippin north wi' angry sough,  
 undoubtedly suggested  
     November chill blaws loud wi' angry sugh,  
 in the "Cotter's Saturday Night."

#### IV

What conclusion is to be drawn? Fergusson gives Burns one stanza, and one poetic form, (if the dialogue be so considered). He makes the subject of three pieces, and is mentioned in two others. He is strongly felt in but two poems, and in less than half a dozen isolated passages; in two he is visible but not strong; and in five others he is barely perceptible. Let the intangible fact called inspiration be added, and we have estimated the amount of Burns's debt to his predecessor.

To balance that which indeed needs no balancing, examine the contents of the Kilmarnock volume with its Edinburgh additions and posthumous pieces; glance at the songs which in bulk amount to at least one-third of the poet's entire work. Then recall the poetical influences of his early years — the folk songs, tales and ballads that made so deep an impression upon his boyhood — "cultivated the latent seeds of poetry" are his own words; recall that in his youth he read Ramsay, and that a collection of English songs was his *vade mecum* (to use his own phrase once more); and finally, remembering that Fergusson was not read until the poet's twenty-third year, and then only put in motion what was waiting to be moved — when these facts are taken into consideration, the conclusion must inevitably be that Fergusson exerted no powerful influence upon his great successor.

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